

Holocaust Survivor

I am a Holocaust survivor. Even though more than 60 years have gone by, it still is very difficult for me to verbalize the events I went through.

I was born in France and survived the Holocaust of World War II due to the heroism, sacrifice and kindness of a Christian couple who chose to hide my sister and I when our parents were led away to the death camps. More on that later.

The heroes of this story are Suzanne and Henri Ribouleau and their two sons, René and Marcel. The Ribouleau family was our neighbors, living a floor below, in our apartment building, 17 Rue St. Fiacre.

My parents emigrated from Poland to the safety of France (or so they thought). They aimed to escape the “pogroms”, the hatred of Jewish people and simply the bleak life of being Jewish there. They made a good life for themselves in Compiègne, France; a town of about 20,000 people located 40 miles north of Paris. Our parents owned a clothing shop and lived in a nice apartment in the center of town. My sister, Rachel, was born on 1932 and I in 1937. In 1940, I was 3 years old and everything was about to change.

The German bombing began, destroying 50% of our town. The Allied Forces declared war on Germany. Our father, who was Polish, enlisted in the Polish Detachment under the command of the French Army to fight the Germans. My sister remembers our mother in tears watching our small apartment building crumble before our eyes while our father was away in the Armed Forces. Our mother who did not have a license and probably had never driven a car managed to drive the three of us to Paris, a two-hour trip in those days, because she thought it would be safe! Soon after the start of the war, France surrendered to the Germans. My father, somehow, found us and we were reunited. France was now occupied. Most people returned to the towns they had fled. Our home had been destroyed; our parents found a vacant apartment, which we had to leave when the previous occupants returned. We moved to an apartment located on the top floor (3rd) of “17 Rue Saint Fiacre”. This address brings so many incredible memories. We resumed a life of uncertainty and fear under the German occupation. We had no idea what was in store for us.

The relative calm lasted only a few months. The discrimination against Jews began. Jews had to wear a Yellow Star and were no longer allowed to own a

business of any kind, thus depriving us of any income. Jews could no longer go to public parks or eat in public places. Jews could no longer go to movie theaters nor could they own a radio, and on and on.

It kept getting worse until that horrible Sunday morning, July 19, 1942. At 5am, Two French policemen knocked at the door and asked my parents to accompany them. They did not give any reasons for taking them away and would not let them go back inside the apartment.

My mother was 29 years old. My father was 35. My sister was 9 and I was almost 4 and half. "What about our children?" my parents asked hysterically. The cries and questions fell on deaf ears. The policemen had been told by the gestapo to arrest only our parents, and that is what they did. The policemen were too lame to disobey orders or somehow pass on the word that they would come to pick our parents up. The commotion woke up our neighbors from down below and they came to see what the trouble was.

My father explained that they were being taken to police headquarters and had no time to make arrangements for us, their children. Thinking that my parents would return in a few hours, Monsieur Rihouleau, a kind man who always had a warm hello whenever we saw him said:

"Monsieur et Madame Malmed, do not worry. We will take care of your children until you return". I have images of my sister and I crying and hanging on to our parent's clothes, not wanting to let go of them. Monsieur and Madame Riboulcau kept reassuring my parents not to worry about their children. "They are in good hands with us," she said.

Little did we know that was the last time we would ever see our parents again.

So began our new lives as Jewish children hidden by a Christian family a couple which put their lives and the lives of their two sons, René, 20, and Marcel, 17, in danger of death 24 hours a day, for the next three years.

Incredibly, for the next three years, those wonderful people paid the rent of our parents apartment, out of their savings, so our parents would have a place to live when they returned!

There were a few people in the neighborhood befriending the German soldiers and we were in constant fear of being denounced. As the hunt for Jews intensified, people would ask: "Why are you doing this? Why are you risking your and your sons' lives?" Their answer was always: "How can we not protect these two children? We promised their parents that we would take care of them until they return".

In retrospect, the enormity of that task is mind boggling. These well meaning neighbors made an on the spot vow to virtual strangers not only to care for

their children but to protect them from harm. There was no time to think of the potential consequences of such a decision. They did not know it at the time. It quickly became apparent that it was a life and death decision for them and their two sons.

In addition to the threat of immediate death for harboring Jews, the family life had to be reorganized. Someone had to stay with me at all times at the beginning. There were not enough bedrooms in the apartment, so René and Marcel had to move out of the bedroom they were sharing and move upstairs to our parents' apartment while we took their rooms. Food supply was a critical problem as it was scarce and rationed. Since my sister and I were not supposed to exist, we did not have a ration card. The small amount of food that was available for four people, now had to be shared by six. We had a small garden but winters were long and nothing grows in winter in that region of France. The toll on all of us, especially on their sons, was terrible. Several times a week, Monsieur Ribouleau would go to the butcher at 4 in the morning, wait in line for 2 to 3 hours and would return home with nothing. There were many evening meals consisting of some bread dipped in milk. After living with Monsieur and Madame Ribouleau for a few months, I started to call them Maman and Papa. To this day, I never stopped thinking of my own parents.

During an era of deadly repression, under a monstrous regime, there were rewards for providing information on people hiding Jews of any age. I vividly recall the time when we had minutes to elude the Germans, who probably had been tipped off of our existence and were on their way to our home with their dreaded black trucks. We eventually ended up 5 miles away at papa Henri's sister-in-law where we stayed until nightfall. She too was afraid and did not want us to stay overnight. We returned to our apartment that same night; slept in our clothes waiting for the knock on the door. I am here today.

On the same day, our cousin, Charles Malmed, 5 years old who lived in the same town about 10 minutes away was picked up by the Germans. He was also hidden in a Christian family. He was deported to Auschwitz on January 20th 1944 along with 269 children. They were all gassed on arrival in Auschwitz. His parents had been taken away the same day as our parents. There were so many instances of such close calls, but somehow we managed to survive.

Before the war there were about 1000 Jews in Compiègne. After the war my sister and I were the only two remaining survivors.

Our parents left the Camp of Drancy on July 29 1942 for Auschwitz in a Convoy of 1000 people, 270 men and 730 women. Upon arrival in Auschwitz, 270 men and 514 women were sent to slave labor. 216 women were gassed immediately.

In Auschwitz and Birkenau alone, from April 15, 1942 to April 15 1944, 1 million 715 thousand Jews, adults and children, were assassinated in the same monstrous way: stripped, gassed, burned in the ovens, reduced to powder, processed and sent to Germany to fertilize the German fields.

The war ended in 1945 after 5 long years. Rachel was 13 and I was 8. With great anticipation, we waited for the return of our parents. We thought they had been detained somewhere in Europe.

It took a long time to accept that we would never see them again.

The torments would not stop there. We soon learned the fate of our parents and family. At that time, I hated being a Jew, and that feeling lasted for many years. Adding to the trauma of having lost our parents and having lived 3 years in constant fear, a surviving aunt and uncle, brother and sister of our parents, found us and requested that we go and live with them. My sister and I refused to do so as we did not know these people. In those days, communication and travel was not what it is today.

After months of legal battles, a judge, without asking us with whom we wanted to live, decided our fate and ordered my sister and I to go and live with aunt and uncle, total strangers to us. They resided in a town one hour away, called St Quentin. In St Quentin I had a horrible time and cried myself to sleep every night. I wanted nothing to do with these people. I had come to love the Ribouleau family that had sheltered my sister and me for 3 years. The family that had saved our lives starved for us and most importantly given us unconditional love. I wanted to run back to the only parents I had ever known, the Ribouleau family. By then, I hardly remembered my biological parents. On the other hand, my sister, reluctantly, accepted her fate. After two years of unhappiness, my uncle and aunt decided to send my sister to an aunt in America. I was 10 years old. What was going to happen to me?

Once again, I was separated from my sister whom I loved. She had become a mother to me. Once again, I had no say in my own life.

I accompanied my sister to the train station on a cold December day in 1949. I did not know then that it would be 14 years before we would see each other again. How many times could I be torn away from familiarity? How many times could I be expected to adapt to new circumstances? In seven years, I had been taken unexpectedly from the stability of loving parents into a life with

total strangers, our neighbors, whom I grew to love, only to be taken by an uncle and aunt who were also total strangers to me. Sadly, I never did develop love for the aunt and uncle. And once again I was to be separated from my beloved sister.

At that time, I had made up my mind. I was mad at the whole world. The days of being chaperoned by anyone were gone. The days of counting on someone else to make decisions for me were gone. I needed to take my future into my own hands. I decided that I would return, no matter what, to the only family I loved and felt loved by. After months of acrimonious disputes with my uncle and aunt and threats of being sent to an orphanage, they let me go back to Compiègne with the Ribouleau family. I was 12.

Three miserable years had passed since I had left. Marcel and René had married and left home. Finally, I was at peace.

The last three troubled years had taught me a valuable lesson. I had succeeded on my own to change the course of my life and I felt that I could accomplish anything from hereon.

At the age of 18, my sister married a nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn. That was 55 years ago. They have two daughters and four grandchildren.

I was married in France at the age of 26.

Over the 14 years, I never lost touch with my sister. We wrote to each other once a month. Since the telephone was neither in our budget nor in our home, for 14 years we did not hear each others voices. In 1963, I received a wonderful letter saying that Izzy, her husband, was making reservations for him and my sister to come to France. Wahoo. All the emotions that had been buried for so long surfaced.

My sister and her husband, Izzy came to France and it was a joyous reunion. I remembered my sister leaving France at the age of 16, poorly dressed and now, married to a "Rich American" (in Europe, we assumed that all Americans were rich, very well dressed and looking wonderful. My brother-in-law had been wanting for many years to reunite us and not only in France. He convinced my wife and I to immigrate to America. When they returned, they worked in earnest to get us the Visas. Seven months later, in February of 1964, my pregnant wife, our 18-month-old son and I, with a few hundred dollars in our pocket came down the passageway of the SS France in New York harbor.

In 1978, my wife wanted her freedom and to my great disappointment, a divorce ensued. A couple of years later, I met Patricia; we have three children and three grandchildren.

After immigrating to the US, I wrote to papa and maman Ribouleau every week. I visited with them at least once a year and my sister and I brought them to the States twice. Papa Henri died about in 1987 at the age of 84 and maman Suzanne died in 2003 at the age of 98. My wife Patricia and I were with her during her last moments. Marcel and Rene passed away, as well, a number of years back.

One of the reasons I tell the account of that period of my life is mostly to keep these wonderful people alive and for the World to know that such people does exist. I want the World to know that out of this tragedy, out of evil, came tremendous courage and goodness from many people who were never brought up to become heroes.

This is evident when you visit the Avenue of the Righteous at the Jerusalem Holocaust Yad Vashem Memorial. In 1979, my sister and I had them awarded the Righteous Status, the highest Honor given by Israel to a non Jew. A wonderful ceremony, in Jerusalem, attended by the French Ambassador to Israel and the Israeli Ambassador to France was held at the Yad Vashem Institute. They received the "Medal of the Justes" which in English means the "Medal of the Righteous" for their heroism and extraordinary courage.

If you are ever in Jerusalem, make sure to visit the Yad Vashem Institute and the Park that is now a forest with each tree dedicated to a Juste, a person or a family who saved one or more person of Jewish faith. The, then, small tree, planted for Suzanne and Henri Ribouleau is now gigantic, and reflects the strength of the size of their heart and courage when they were alive.

According to Jewish traditions, if you save one life, it is as if you have saved a Nation.

As long as we live, we will never forget these heroes Henri, Suzanne, René and Marcel Ribouleau who saved us from certain death.

There is another reason for my decision to speak out after so many years.

The proper attitude towards the Holocaust can be best summed up with the phrase: "NEVER FORGET".

Leon Malmed

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